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The Gospel Luther's Linchpin for Catholicity

Gordon A. Jensen

Introduction

Much has been made about the fact that after Luther launched the reformation in Germany, he changed the wording of the third article of the Apostles' Creed from "holy *catholic* Church" to "holy *Christian* Church." The earliest recorded accounts of Luther changing the traditional wording of the Apostles' Creed, from catholic to Christian, are found in his German writings of 1520. Nor does he make this change only once that year. He makes this change in his treatise, *On the Papacy in Rome: Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig*, written at the end of May and the beginning of June;¹ again in his *Treatise on Good Works*, written a couple of weeks later;² and yet again in his treatise, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, written in October.³ This change has been interpreted as a sign of Luther's rejection of the church catholic, especially when he begins using "holy Christian Church" in the creeds at the same time as his reformation theology is coming into full force. This change is explained by suggesting that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith was causing a domino effect as other previously accepted church teachings were now being re-evaluated under the knife of this "first and chief article."⁴

In true Lutheran manner, the Lutheran Churches in North America have followed Luther's practice of substituting Christian for catholic in the creeds for four centuries. When many Lutheran churches in North America collaborated to introduce a new worship book in 1978,⁵ there was wailing and gnashing of teeth because the traditional phrase in the third article of the creed, "I believe in the holy Christian Church" was audaciously replaced with "I believe in the holy catholic Church." Opponents of the change did not care that catholic was spelled with a small "c." They saw such a change as nothing short of heretical, and a betrayal of all things Lutheran. They claimed Luther had changed catholic to Christian in order to distinguish the true from the false church. Moreover, after time, it became common to define "Lutheran" as simply, "not catholic." However, that is not a helpful definition.

In a similar vein, during the celebrations of the 450th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, many Roman Catholic theologians stated that they recognized the Augsburg Confession as an ecumenical, *catholic* document—but wondered if Lutherans also recognize it as such.⁶ In response, many Lutherans angrily

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responded, “we are not catholic! That’s why Luther changed the phrase of the creed to holy Christian Church.”

These reactions point to the need to explore again how Luther defined and used the words catholic and Christian within the context of his understanding of ecclesiology and its apostolic task. Some Lutherans might suggest an even bolder approach and heed the advice of James Atkinson. He suggested that it is now time to set Luther free from all the confessional Lutheranism that has accrued around him, and “set him in the centre of a new catholicity, where he once belonged and still belongs.”⁷⁷ Would, and could, Lutherans dare take up this challenge?

Before making such a decision, it would be helpful to explore how the word catholic was used in the period before the reformation, and how Luther himself used it in shaping his theology and developing his ecclesiology. The starting point is to look at how the word catholic was translated and used in the period immediately prior to the beginnings of the reformation.

Matters of Language: Catholic or Christian?

The common perception today asserts that Luther set about with clarity of purpose, almost from the outset, his task of promoting the *gospel* over the Catholic Church. The opposition he encountered in the first years of the reformation struggle merely strengthened his resolve. He was warned at Augsburg by Cardinal Cajetan in the fall of 1518 that his views on justifying faith amounted to “creating a new church.” Further, when forced by his opponent Johann Eck at the Leipzig disputation in 1519 into admitting his belief that Jan Huss (†1415) was no heretic, Luther knew that he was firmly beyond the Catholic pale even before the papal condemnations started arriving on his desk. Any residual desire he might have had to claim the title Catholic in his attempts to restore the church to its original calling was finally abandoned when he translated the creeds into German, removing the word catholic as a defining adjective of the church. This is the common perception of Luther’s view.

This perception is partially correct. Luther did indeed delete catholic as a descriptor and definer of the church in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and substituted, in its place, the word Christian. Furthermore, he was entirely consistent in this substitution—which is in itself remarkable because unwavering consistency is not a characteristic one normally associates with Luther. One must therefore assume that replacing catholic with Christian in his translation of the creedal formulas into German was a deliberate decision on his part. Luther never gives a theological explanation for this translation, other than to claim that it was the best translation available. As he notes in his 1538 treatise on *The Three Creeds*: “[Catholic (*Catholica*)] can have no better translation than Christian (*Christlich*) as was done heretofore. That is, although Christians are to be found in the whole world, the pope rages against that and wants to have his court alone called the Christian Church. He lies, however, like his idol, the devil.”⁷⁸ Here

Luther claims that the word catholic had been translated into the German language as Christian before he had done so, and that such a translation was already the custom.

Luther's claim that he is simply following custom is verified in some of the most popular works of practical divinity circulating in the empire on the eve of the Reformation.⁹ This practice is followed in the popular *Vocabularius predicantium*, a handy dictionary that translated various biblical and ecclesiastical terms (mainly from Latin) into German, compiled by Johannes Melber and the Heidelberg humanist Jodocus Eichmann, and published frequently between 1480 and 1505.¹⁰ Under the entry "Catholic" the translation was given as "a Christian person."¹¹ So Luther is not the first to make this switch.

Other late medieval sources in Germany also translated the Latin "catholic" as "Christian." The most popular preaching manual in use in Germany on the eve of the Reformation was the *Manuale curatorum* of Johann Ulrich Surgant.¹² This *Manuale* offered both German and French translations of the Apostles' Creed, since the book was designed for use in the area around the Rhine River. Surgant's French translation of "I believe in the Holy catholic Church" ("*credo in ecclesiam catholicam*") is "*la sainte eglise catholique*," but his German translation reads "*die heilige christenliche kirch*."¹³ So even before the Reformation, the word Christian was considered a more natural and appropriate to the German language than catholic, but this was not the case in French. The choice of word in these contexts was linguistic, not theological. Luther himself appears to support this practice of different translations for different languages. For example, until the end of his life, when he wrote in Latin, he continued to use the phrase, *sanctam catholicam ecclesiam*.¹⁴ He did not, therefore, reject the idea of the church catholic by his translation of catholic as Christian in the German language.

Luther was therefore right to say, in his gloss, that his translation was in line with custom, "as has happened hitherto."¹⁵ But it is not as simple as this. He also took advantage of this golden opportunity to draw attention to the mistaken interpretation of this phrase by the pope, suggesting that his translation was also motivated by theological and political considerations.

To explore Luther's theological understanding of catholicity, therefore, it is helpful to turn to his writings in the 1530s as he worked to shape and implement a reformation church. Three documents will be considered. First, the encounter between Luther and the papal nuncio, Vergerio, which occurred in November of 1535, will be explored. Second, Luther's 1537 Schmalkald Articles will be examined. Third, some observations from his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, will be given. Each of these reveal that far from being against the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as confessed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, Luther sought to recover the apostolic message of the gospel as a condition of the church's catholicity. Apart from the apostolic message, the people of God cannot be catholic.

Luther's Conversation with Vergerio, 1535

Ever since the dispute over the sale of indulgences, Luther had been calling for a free, ecumenical council to discuss the matter.¹⁶ The popes who sat in Peter's chair

however—from Leo X, pope at the time of the 1517 “Theses on Indulgences,” to Clement VII, who died in September of 1534—had no interest in such an unpredictable event. Even though Charles V had extracted promises from Clement VII that he would call a council after the Nuremberg Stalemate of 1532,¹⁷ nothing was done. It was not until Paul III ascended to the papal chair on October 12, 1534, that discussions became serious. One of the first things Paul III did was to send out nuncios to get a sense from the nobility and ecclesial authorities of where, when, or even if a council should be held. It was within this context that the papal nuncio Pietro Paulo Vergerio appeared in Saxony in November of 1535 to discuss the matter with Elector John Frederick. Just before he arrived in Wittenberg, he also asked to meet with Luther—which he prudently did not mention in his report to the pope.

Luther’s report of this meeting, as recorded in the Table Talks, is an interesting mixture of comedy and theological insight. Luther regales those present with details of how the nuncio rode into town in luxury, in a carriage pulled by at least a dozen horses. When he stepped out of the carriage, the gathered crowd saw that he was dressed in splendor. Not to be outdone, Luther got a haircut and a shave for the event. He dressed in his best clothes, put rings on his fingers and marched over to the castle for the meeting, accompanied by Johannes Bugenhagen, pastor of the town church.¹⁸ As they walked over to the castle, Luther joked that the Wittenberg pope and Cardinal Pomeranus were off to meet an ambassador of the Roman pope. When Luther got to the castle, he put on his most youthful face, so that neither the nuncio nor the pope might get the idea that they could be rid of him by delaying a council for a few more years. It appeared to work, according to all reports, though it was the intensity in Luther’s eyes that most captivated Vergerio. While Luther did not remove his hat, he used all the proper titles for the nuncio. By speaking to Vergerio in German, he caused the nuncio to wonder if Luther had really written the early spurious books attributed to him, since he did not seem to understand any Latin!¹⁹ When Luther boasted about how he had married an honorable nun and had five children with her, Vergerio began to think that Luther was nothing but a godless beast.

At this meeting, Vergerio began by outlining the possibilities of a council, including the approximate dates and potential locations.²⁰ He then turned gingerly to the question of Luther’s participation in such a council. To his surprise, however, Luther quickly stated that if a council was called, he would come, regardless of where it was held, offering his head and neck.²¹ Then, however, Luther added that since the gospel would not be on the agenda, nothing important would be discussed,

Nothing of salutary worth, nothing of sacraments, the faith which alone makes righteous and blessed, nothing of good works and pious ways and living piously. Rather, all they will discuss is the work of fools and children, the length of the vestments that pastors and preachers are to wear, how wide their cinctures should be, which rules should be added to further control nuns and monks and further confuse them as to when foods and drinks are to be consumed, and other puppet works.²²

According to Luther's no doubt biased report, after hearing this, Vergerio grabbed his head in his hands and declared to his travelling companions, "He is right about what should be discussed at the council. Germany is illuminated by the gospel and this good doctor has opened their eyes to the truth!"²³ Of course, this did not appear in Vergerio's report to the pope.²⁴ It did appear to have an impact upon the nuncio, however. Even though he was later appointed bishop as a reward for his faithful service in setting up the council that would finally take place in Trent,²⁵ within a few years he was charged with heresy and banned from attending the very council which he had worked so hard to arrange. After being condemned, he joined the reformation cause, and became an evangelical pastor in northern Italy.

In the midst of all the flourishes and grandiose statements in Luther's report, a stark statement of what makes a church catholic or Christian, as well as the purpose for a council, is revealed. The one, holy, catholic church is defined, not by external rites, not by rules, nor by ecclesial regulations. Rather, the church is defined by what is at its core: the apostolic message. This apostolic message is nothing else than the gospel of justification, as it is proclaimed in word and sacrament, and which equips the communion of saints to live as the people of God.

Further, for a council to be truly ecumenical and catholic, it must be centered in the gospel message, or it ceases to be a catholic council. Instead, it becomes simply a Roman or papist gathering. At such a gathering the head is no longer Christ Jesus, but a usurper, one who stands in the way of Christ—thus, an antichrist. Therefore, when Luther talked about the Roman or papist church, or even the pope himself as antichrist, what he was criticizing was their abandonment of the gospel message.²⁶ When that message is lost, the church, despite its structures, rules or regulations, ceases to be the church catholic. Apparently, at least according to Luther's version of the story, Vergerio discovered this in his meeting with Luther. It would not be a truly ecumenical and catholic council unless the church gathered around the gospel, the apostolic message.

In commenting on this event between Luther and Vergerio, James Kittelson insisted that for the reformers, "it was impossible to be 'catholic' unless one was 'evangelical.' Being evangelical made one catholic."²⁷ Kittelson understood evangelical in the sense of proclaiming the apostolic message that by Christ's death and resurrection, sins are forgiven and life and salvation is bestowed upon the believer.²⁸ It is this gospel that makes the church catholic. The weakness of the phrase in the Apostles' Creed (or Children's Creed, as Luther often called it²⁹) was that it did not unequivocally state that the church is constituted around the apostolic message, unlike the Nicene Creed.³⁰ While the Apostles' Creed later declares belief in the "forgiveness of sins," this gospel could now erroneously be seen as one of the *functions* of the church rather than that which *constitutes* the church.

The Schmalkald Articles, 1538

When the Schmalkaldic League, comprised of secular authorities, princes and rulers sympathetic to the reformation, gathered shortly after Paul III's call for a council in Mantua, Italy, they were a little more cautious than Luther in committing

themselves to attend. They were not quite so ready to offer to the council their head and neck. Nevertheless, they based their decisions upon similar criteria for a council as had Luther, albeit couched in political terms.³¹ They had made subscription to the Augsburg Confession, which had been presented to Emperor Charles V in June of 1530, as a condition for membership in the league, so they were clearly supportive, at least to some degree, of the theological approach of Melancthon and Luther. They wanted to make their decisions judiciously, and so in the summer of 1536, Elector John Frederick asked Luther to prepare some articles for the league to consider in their decision making. By the end of December of 1536, Luther had drafted some articles, which we unimaginatively called the Schmalkald Articles. These articles played a dual role for Luther in that they enunciated the evangelical position for the league, while also giving him an opportunity to spell out his theological testament of faith.³² Luther left the Schmalkaldic League meetings early due to illness, and thus did not realize that his articles were put aside, in favor of Melancthon's *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*.³³ Luther's articles, later included in the corpus of Lutheran Confessional documents, however, provide some informative clarifications of his view of the criteria by which a church can be considered truly catholic.

In the preface to the Schmalkald Articles, added by Luther to the 1538 edition, Luther notes: "I would indeed very much like to see a true council, in order to assist with a variety of matters and to aid many people. Not that we need it, for through God's grace our churches are now enlightened and supplied with the pure Word and right use of the sacraments, an understanding of the various walks of life, and true works."³⁴ In this echo of the response given to Vergerio a few years earlier, Luther again identifies the link between catholicity, the gospel, and a council. The purpose of a council is for the clarification of the gospel—of what is at the core of the catholic or Christian faith.³⁵ The truly Christian or catholic community does not need a council for itself for it is already clear about proclaiming and living the gospel. They are "enlightened and supplied with the pure word and right use of the sacraments." On the other hand, since "the pope and his people are lost and do not want [God's] help,"³⁶ they have rejected the gospel and have placed themselves outside of the church catholic.

The structure of the Schmalkald Articles is also instructive in understanding Luther's concept of catholicity. He divides the Articles into three sections: 1) articles that are not in dispute; 2) the chief article, by which nothing can be given up; and 3) things that need to be discussed among reasonable people. It is important to note what he places in the first two categories, for it also spells out his criteria for what makes the church catholic (its *esse*). The first section, significantly, is a composite paraphrase based on the first two articles of the three ecumenical creeds. The third article, especially the phrases that cover the church and her activities and ministry, are conspicuous by their absence.³⁷ There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, Luther prefaces the first section with the notation that "the first part of the Articles deals with the lofty articles of the Divine Majesty."³⁸ The nature of God in God's triune nature, along with the two natures of Christ, claims Luther, are not a matter "of dispute or conflict, for both sides confess them."³⁹ The infallibility and nature of the church, as led by the

pope, on the other hand, was under debate.⁴⁰ Second, and more importantly, he understands the church as the place where the word about this Triune God is proclaimed, rather than a part of the *content* of what is infallible and eternal. The church itself can err, and is thus not infallible, but the doctrines concerning the Trinity and Christ are above reproach. As early as 1521, in his treatise on *The Misuse of the Mass*, Luther had commented that

[the devil] has succeeded to such an extent that the papists dare to say: The church cannot err; as if Christ were lying when he says that the elect (who alone are the church) are to be led astray [Mt 24:24]; or as if the church were not the church because it happened to sin or err, when indeed Christ is daily cleansing it of its sins and errors, like the branches of the vine [Jn 15:2]; or as if the faithful and holy ones never sinned.⁴¹

Thus, the doctrines of God's nature and activities are at the core of what is catholic and evangelical, but the doctrine of the church is not. The church is responsible for proclaiming this catholic and evangelical message, and it is the primary place where it occurs. Thus, Luther often called the church the "mouth-house" (*Mundhaus*).⁴² But the church itself is not the content of the message. For this reason, how the church is governed, with or without a "humanly instituted head," in and of itself, does not guarantee the church's catholicity, although it could conceivably help if its leadership was committed to the gospel. As Luther states, "Therefore the church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops—equal according to the office (although they may be unequal in their gifts)—keep diligently together in unity of teaching, faith, sacraments, prayers, and works of love."⁴³ The church's unity is found in the gospel, the proclamation of word and sacrament which in turn empowers people to live lives of faith, and not in a structure or hierarchy centered in Rome.

Crucial to this perspective is Luther's insistence that the gospel is a living event or activity of God that gathers the people of God around it, rather than a static possession that can be contained in a place or structure. This approach to the gospel is echoed in a similar way in the Augsburg Confession by Philip Melancthon, where the church is defined as "the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly."⁴⁴ This *satis est*, consisting of word and sacrament, as Melancthon describes it, is nothing less than the gospel, and it is this gospel that makes a gathering catholic, whether at a council or in a congregation.

In the second section of the Schmalkald Articles, Luther spells out the catholic message in even more detail, calling it the "first and chief article."⁴⁵ He emphasizes Christ's actions, by which humans are justified "apart from works." These unilateral actions of God comprise the gospel, for they alone give salvation, the good news to a condemned people who cannot save themselves. Luther then asserts that "nothing in this article can be conceded or given up," and that "on this article stands all that we teach and practice."⁴⁶ For him, it is the essence (*esse*) of the church's catholicity. What is included in this article is enough (*satis est*) to define the gospel, and thus, what is of the essence of the church catholic. If this is lost, all is lost. Further, all subsequent

doctrines, dogmas, and teachings in the church and about the church are also to be measured by these standards.⁴⁷ Without the gospel, the message of God creating and bestowing life and salvation, the church is not catholic. Further, apart from this gospel, no amount of human effort can make the church holy or one. Only God can make the church holy and united, through the catholic and apostolic message.

While the Schmalkaldic League did not ultimately sign the Schmalkald Articles in February of 1537, they did finally reach a consensus. They would attend the proposed council, as long as four criteria were met. It is noteworthy that these conditions were not strictly secular issues, but they nevertheless reflected their concerns which flowed out of their evangelical commitments that the council be truly catholic, and not just Romanist. The council had to: 1) be a free council, rather than papal; 2) the evangelical churches must be invited as full participants, rather than as heretics; 3) decisions must be based on the Scriptures rather than papal authority; and 4) it must be held in Germany, if at all possible.⁴⁸ This last condition was apparently a critical point in the negotiations, since they felt that Luther and others would be placed on trial for heresy, as had been the case with Huss. When Charles V was elected emperor in 1519, one of the things that he had promised, in a series of “electoral capitulations,” was to not condemn any German unheard, and that if such a trial were to take place, it must be held on German territory.⁴⁹ They decided that even if the pope was found wanting in the proclamation of the gospel, then it was the responsibility of the others at the council to correct such teachings and restore the church to its catholic and orthodox center. The Schmalkaldic League also felt that since the pope was the one on trial for being a persecutor of the gospel, he could not preside at such a council. As things stood, however, in their minds it was the papists and not the evangelicals that were outside of the church catholic.

On the Councils and the Church, 1539

In his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther continues to emphasize and further clarify that the church catholic is to be identified by its proclamation of the gospel. Here, however, he also discusses how the definition of the term “church” is crucial in the creedal phrase, especially in relation to catholicity. Because of his definition of the term church as a political gathering, Luther can make the claim that the Roman church is, at the moment, not catholic, and thus, not Christian.

Luther bases his definition of the term church by beginning with Acts 19:39, noting that in the Latin Vulgate, the term *ecclesia* is used for the gathering or assembly of people in the town market place.⁵⁰ He then claims that “in these and other passages, the *ecclesia* or church is nothing but an assembly of people, though they probably were heathens and not Christians. It is the same term used by town councilmen for their assembly which they summon to the city hall.”⁵¹ The difference between an assembly of heathens and an assembly of Christians is that the latter are

a people with a special call and therefore are called not just *ecclesia*, “church,” or “people,” but *sancta catholica Christiana*, that is, “a Christian holy people” who believe in Christ. That is why they are called a Christian

people and have the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies them daily, not only through the forgiveness of sins acquired for them by Christ [i.e. the Gospel!] (as the Antinomians foolishly believe), but also through the abolition, the purging, and the mortification of sins, on the basis of which they are called a holy people. Thus the “holy Christian church” is synonymous with a Christian and holy people or, as one who is also wont to express it, with “holy Christendom,” or “whole Christendom.”⁵²

Here, in a most remarkable move, Luther replaces *sancta catholica ecclesia* with *sancta catholica Christiana*. It is the word *ecclesia* (church), not *catholica*,⁵³ that is in conflict with “Christian.” Thus, catholic modifies Christian rather than church. Catholic and Christian, therefore, are complementary words, rather than opposites, in Luther’s mind. Further, when Luther translates *ecclesia* into German, he prefers to avoid the word *kirche* wherever possible. Instead, as he notes in the Large Catechism, he favors the words *Gemeine* or *Versammlung*, translated as a gathering, assembly, or community. This shift moves the focus from an institution or hierarchy to the function of proclamation, since, following Melancthon’s understanding, “for this is enough (*satis est*) for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word.”⁵⁴ The proclaimed word and sacrament create, as God created in the beginning by proclaiming a word, a people of God from those who are gathered in community. Apart from this proclamation event, the people are nothing more than a gathered people. These people also become a holy community when God acts through the word and sacrament. Likewise, the phrase, “communion of saints” is better translated as *ein Gemeine der Heiligen*,⁵⁵ a community of saints. As Luther further explains in the explanation to the third article of the creed in the Small Catechism,⁵⁶ they are made “the holy ones” by God’s actions through the Spirit’s working and through the redemptive actions of Christ.

One also notices that Luther does not constrict the understanding of *Gemeine* to a local congregation. Wherever two are three are gathered in the *Gemeine*, God is in their midst and the fullness of the church is present. Similar to Luther’s understanding of the ubiquity of Christ in the sacrament,⁵⁷ Christ and the church cannot be restricted to a local presence.

Luther concludes from his study of the word *ecclesia* that while the Roman church could call itself a church, a gathering, it lacked the gospel and thus could not be called a Christian church.⁵⁸ Therefore, it was outside of the church catholic. He states:

[The Romanists, led by the pope] give themselves the right name when they call themselves *ecclesia* (that is, if we interpret this term to agree with their way of life), either *Romana* or *sancta*, but do not add (as indeed they cannot) *catholica*. For *ecclesia* means “a people”; that they are, just as the Turks, too, are *ecclesia*, “a people.” *Ecclesia Romana* means “a Roman people”; that they are too, and indeed much more Roman than the heathen of ancient times were. *Ecclesia Romana sancta* means “a holy Roman people”; that they are too, for they have invented a holiness far greater than the holiness of Christians, or than the holy Christian people possess.⁵⁹

This holiness that they possess, however, is not rooted in the gospel, brought about by the unilateral actions of God, but it is manufactured by their own good works, meant to please and appease God. It is based on human works, and thus is contrary to the gospel. Further, the Romanists' rejection of the gospel puts them outside of the church catholic, rather than at its center. Thus Luther concludes, "Therefore, they are not entitled to the name 'Christian church' or 'Christian people,' if for no other reason than that 'Christian church' is a name and 'Christian holiness' an entity common to all churches and Christians in the world; therefore it is called 'catholic.'"⁶⁰ Apart from the gospel, people cannot make themselves holy, nor can they be made holy in God's eyes (*coram Deo*). Their salvation comes through justification by grace alone through faith alone, as they are then transformed into God's holy people. An assembly or *ecclesia* is not a part of the "holy Christian or catholic people" apart from it being engaged and empowered by the gospel.

Having clarified his definition of *ecclesia*, Luther then goes on to delineate seven marks or signs of the "church catholic." The church catholic is recognized, first, by its possession of the holy word of God,⁶¹ which sanctifies and consecrates everything. This word of God, however, is primarily the gospel. Thus he can say:

Now, wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, a "Christian holy people," must be there, even though their number is very small. ... And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian holy people must exist there, for God's word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word.⁶²

Without God's word, this *promissio* that brings life and salvation to those mired in the clutches of sin and death by the devil, the people of God are without hope and salvation. On the other hand, this life-giving action of God, through the gospel promise, is exactly what the church catholic should be about. In his commentary on John 1:1, Luther explains the function of the word in a succinct, poignant way:

May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian Church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be and remain in the church and little flock of the fainthearted, the feeble, and the ailing, who feel and recognize the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sin, and who suffer persecution for the sake of the Word, which they confess and teach purely and without adulteration. Satan is a cunning rogue. Through his fanatics he wants to trick the simple-minded into the belief that the preaching of the Gospel is useless. "Greater effort" is necessary, they say. "We must lead a holy life, bear the cross, and endure persecution." And by such a semblance of self-styled holiness, which runs counter to the Word of God, many a person is misled. But our righteousness and holiness is Christ. In Him, not in ourselves, we have perfection (Col 2:10).⁶³

God's word creates life and creates a sanctified people out of those who were once no people. It is not the greater effort of the people, or the promises of the hierarchy, but the proclamation of the gospel, the forgiveness of sins, that brings the people of God alive, as surely as God's breathe creates humankind (Gn 2:7) and brings dry bones to life (Ez 37). The Romanists, with their own works, reject this gospel and replace it with "greater effort."

The other signs or marks of the church catholic all center on this proclaimed word, this proclaimed gospel. It is the gospel that is proclaimed in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in the office of the keys. Further, the ministerial office, the fifth sign of the church catholic, is to ensure that the gospel is properly proclaimed in word and sacrament. This proclamation of the gospel leads to "prayer, public praise and thanksgiving to God,"⁶⁴ the sixth mark of the church catholic.

Finally, the church catholic is recognized by its "possession of the sacred cross."⁶⁵ When people are gathered into Christ, united with him in a death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–11), they, too, will face taunts and slander and condemnation for their willingness to trust in such a despised and inglorious person as the crucified Christ. In Christ, however, the people of God are also united into life with Christ. This church catholic is not a church of grandeur and glory, but of living life for the other, in the company of those in need, at the foot of the cross. It is through these signs or marks that Christ makes people holy and transforms them into the holy catholic people. Having said this, however, Luther adds a caveat—these are only outward signs,⁶⁶ which others can imitate, to various degrees. What makes these things signs of catholicity, therefore, is not human participation in these things, but God's actions in them, declaring and making God's people holy.

Conclusion

Far from being anti-catholic, as is all too often assumed, Luther was a strong proponent of the church catholic, the holy Christian church—as long as one accepts his understanding of the church catholic. It is not the unity of the church under Rome, nor the institutional structure that makes the church catholic. Rather, the assembly is catholic when the gospel is found in its midst. Catholicity is therefore connected to apostolicity. The gathering of people alone cannot make it catholic. Catholicity comes from the proclamation of the apostolic message, which transforms the gathering into the gathering of God's people. The unity of the church is rooted in the one gospel, in which there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:1–5).

In his book, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic*, James Atkinson observed that:

It is manifest from all the evidence that Luther protested as a Catholic within the Catholic Church: he sought re-formation of that which had suffered de-formation. He wanted his church to be truly and fully catholic and to take within itself again the pure Gospel. This the Church of his day rejected. If today, in the wake of Vatican II, Luther were to be received by the Church and his teaching fully integrated into it, there

would be a conclusion and culmination of Luther's protest: the Church would be truly catholic and evangelical.⁶⁷

Such words aptly summarize Luther's desire for the reformation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. His reformation has not succeeded, and indeed, cannot succeed whenever the gospel is compromised and church bodies cling to a narrowly defined confessional stance that ignores the full implications of the creedal assertions of the church catholic created and sustained by the apostolic message.

Endnotes

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 Volumes (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), Volume 39: Church and Ministry I (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 75. Hereafter listed as LW.

² "Treatise on Good Works" (1520), LW: 44:87; See also Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke:Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. 63 Volumes. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883ff), Vol 6.255.19–23. Hereafter referred to as WA for the Weimar Ausgabe, and WABR for the *Weimar Ausgabe Briefwechsel*.

³ LW 44:135; WA 6.412.15–19.

⁴ Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, II, 1–5. Edited by Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 301.

⁵ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978).

⁶ Personal conversations while I was a student at a Roman Catholic university doing graduate work.

⁷ James Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press; and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 73.

⁸ LW 34:229; WA 50:283.8. "The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith, 1538." The Weimar edition reads: "*Catholica kan man nicht wol besser deutschen denn Christlich, wie bis her geschenen, Das ist: wo Christen sind in aller Welt, da wider tobet der Bapst und wil seinen hoff allein die christliche Kirche geheissen haben. Leugt aber, wie der Teuffel sein Abgot.*" In the introduction to their book, *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, Carl Braaten and Robert Jensen confidently assert from this that "Luther himself substituted 'Christian' for the word 'Catholic' in the Creed, lest it be equated with 'Roman Catholic.'" Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jensen eds., *The Catholicity of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), vii.

⁹ My thanks here to David Bagchi, who explores this in the paper, "The Problem of Catholicity in Early Reformation Germany," given at the 2010 Society for Reformation Studies Conference at Westminster College, Cambridge, England, April 7, 2010.

¹⁰ The immense popularity of this "dictionary" is shown by the fact that it went through at least 26 editions from various Rhineland presses between c. 1480 and 1505. Johannes Melber & Jodocus Eichmann, *Vocabularius predicantium, sive Variloquus*. The edition used was *Vocabularius Jodoci doctoris et predicatoris sacre scripture* ([Strasbourg: M. Schott, between 1484 and 1488]), Bodleian Library, Oxford (shelfmark Auct. 4 Q 5.1). The entries quoted appear at sig. Cviii.

¹¹ "*Catholicus*," is defined as "*ein christenlicher mensch*"; "*Catholici: gemein christen menschen*"; and "*Catholica ecclesia: die gemein christenlich kirch.*" Melber & Eichmann, *Vocabularius predicantium*.

¹² This preacher's manual was first published in 1502. The edition used here is Johann Ulrich Surgent, *Manuale Curatorum predicandi prebens modum: tam latino quam vulgari sermone practice illuminatum: cum certis alijs ad curam animarum pertinentibus: omnibus curatis tam conducibile quam salubre* (Basel, 1508).

¹³ Surgent, *Manuale*, fol. 80v.

¹⁴ For example, the 1520 treatise, "Fourteen Consolations," LW 42:162–163; WA 6:132–133.

¹⁵ "The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith, 1538," LW 34:229; WA 50:283.8.

¹⁶ Luther made his first appeal to a general council on November 28, 1518, in his *Appellatio F. Martini Luther ad Concilium*. WA 2.34–41. Luther was not the first, nor the only person requesting such a council, even though the last council had ended just over a year ago. Beginning as early as 1523, the emperor and various diets had been demanding one as well. However, beginning with Pope Leo X, and until Clement VII, the popes had no interest in calling a council.

¹⁷ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546*. Translated by James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 173.

¹⁸ Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 174–175, reports that Luther wore “a dark doublet with satin sleeves, over which he wore a short, fur-lined coat made of serge, a light woollen material. He also wore a heavy gold chain and several rings.”

¹⁹ Brecht, *The Preservation of the Church*, 175.

²⁰ The civil rulers had been insisting on a council in the territory of the Empire, and he knew that this was a potential problem. He also tried to gather information about the English delegation visiting Wittenberg, since Robert Barnes, one of the delegates, declined to meet with him. According to Brecht, *The Preservation of the Church*, 175, Vergerio felt that action against Henry VIII was a more pressing matter than a council, especially in light of the recent executions of John Fisher and Thomas More.

²¹ As noted by Brecht, *The Preservation of the Church*, 176.

²² WABR 5,638.41–639.4. No. 6388. Luther clearly feels the things discussed are not of the essence (esse) of the gospel. He has already made this point in his 1530 commentary on Psalm 117/118:1. He notes, “What have the popes and bishops made of the Gospel and the Christian Church except a completely ecclesiastical, yes, even a worldly dominion? What else are all the new sectarian spirits, fanatics, and foolish saints trying to do but to turn the Gospel into outward holiness or a new monastic order of grey coats [i.e. the monks and Anabaptists] and a long face? We are told: ‘Praise the Lord, all you heathen. Be heathen, remain heathen, become heathen. Establish ecclesiastical orders, set up rules and codes, make laws and secular government. Be chaste, marry, and devise whatever outward doings and forms you please. But take care that you do not think it possible to become Christians or be saved by such means. Do not imagine for a moment that such things are Christianity or of its essence. For such things as I have just enumerated can all be thought out and established by reason without the help of Christ. One thing must rise high above all that you can devise and do, namely, that you praise the Lord. The things just mentioned praise you yourselves, not the Lord. For these things are yours, developed by you in yourselves out of your mind and previously planted and established in nature.’” LW 14:23–24; WA 31.I.242.12–27.

²³ WABR 5,639.4–9. No. 6388.

²⁴ Vergerio's report is found in Philip Melancthon, *Corpus Reformatorum*, edited by Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider and Henricus Ernestus Bindeseil, Phillippi Melancthonis Opera, 28 volumes (Halle: C.A. Schwetschke, 1834–1860), 2:982–989.

²⁵ Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 176.

²⁶ Such claims are often made by Luther, but they reach their peak in his 1545 treatise, “Against the Roman Papacy, and Institution of the Devil,” LW 41:257–376; WA 54.206–99.

²⁷ James M. Kittelson, “Ecumenism and Condemnation in Luther and Early Lutheranism,” *Lutheran Quarterly* NS 3 No. 2 (Summer 1989), 136–137. Kittelson adds, “To put the matter differently, Melancthon indeed wrote ‘it is enough (satis est) to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments,’ but these terms carried such theological weight that Eck and the Roman party at Augsburg quickly composed a Confutation of Melancthon's work.”

²⁸ Luther often defines the gospel as “the forgiveness of sins,” and insists, according to his Small Catechism, that wherever there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation. See here my forthcoming article, “Martin Luther's Embedded Commentary Within his Translation of Romans 3.”

²⁹ For Luther's use of the title, “Children's Creed,” see WA 50:624; LW 41:132, 143–144.

³⁰ Of course, this understanding of the church contributes to the ongoing debate of the time on whether the church created the scriptures (Roman view) or the scriptures gave birth to the church.

³¹ For historical background on the calling of this council, see Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, 178–184.

³² See here William Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

³³ Philip Melancthon, The Power and Primacy of the Pope, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert and Charles P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

³⁴ Luther, The Smalcald Articles, edited by Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 299. Luther's Preface, 10. (Hereafter, SA). Luther continues: “Therefore we do not ask for a council for our sakes. In such matters, we cannot hope for or expect any improvement from the council. Rather, we see in bishoprics everywhere so many parishes empty and deserted that our hearts are ready to break. And yet, neither bishops nor cathedral canons ask how the poor people live or die—people for whom Christ died. And should not these people hear this same Christ speak to them as the true shepherd with his sheep?”

³⁵ This was indeed what the first seven ecumenical councils did determine what was “orthodox” or “catholic” teachings about the doctrines of God, for the sake of salvation.

³⁶ SA Luther's Pref., 15.

³⁷ SA I.1–4. Luther does make a passing reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, in the paraphrase of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, but not a word is mentioned about the church.

³⁸ SA I.1.

³⁹ SA I.4. This emphasis on the connection between the Triune nature of God and catholicity is also noted in current ecumenical discussions. See here, Braaten and Jenson, eds., *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, 1–12.

⁴⁰ Luther in fact addresses the claim of the infallibility of the pope early in the Smalcald Articles, in Part II, Article 4.

⁴¹ "The Misuse of the Mass" (1521), LW 36:193–194; WA 8.533.26–34. This statement came early in his career as a reformer. He does not change his view over time, however. For example, near the end of his life, Luther aptly summarized his view that apart from the catholic or evangelical message, the church can, and does, err. As he states bluntly in his first two points of his treatise against the Louvain theologians: "1) Whatever is taught in the church of God without the Word is a godless lie," and "2) If it is declared an article of faith, it is a godless heresy." "Against the 32 Articles of the Louvain Theologians" (1545), LW: 34:354; WA 54.425.2–3, 430.21–25.

⁴² WA 10.1:2.48.5.

⁴³ SA II.4.9.

⁴⁴ The Augsburg Confession, Art. VII.1, as found in Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 43 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ SA I.1.1.

⁴⁶ SA I.1.5.

⁴⁷ In the second section of the SA, Luther measures each of the topics according to five criteria; 1) is it in compliance with the first and chief article? 2) is it in accord with God's Word? 3) is it necessary? 4) is it commanded or instructed by God? 5) is it dangerous or harmful?

⁴⁸ See here, introduction, "On the Councils and the Church," LW 42:6.

⁴⁹ Cynthia Grant Schoenberger, "The Development of the Lutheran Theory of Resistance," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 8.1 (April 1977), 66.

⁵⁰ Of course, Luther is not the first to understand ecclesia as such. In classical Greece, the gathering of all the citizens was called the *ecclesia*. The Bauer, Gingrich and Arndt Lexicon translates it as "assembly, as a regularly summoned political body." Walter Bauer, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 241.

⁵¹ LW 41:143; WA 50.624.21–24.

⁵² LW 41:143–144; WA 50.624.27–625.2.

⁵³ At this point, Luther appears to interpret *catholica* as "universal" rather than as a synonym for Christian.

⁵⁴ AC VII.2.

⁵⁵ LC, Creed, 48.

⁵⁶ SC, II. 6.

⁵⁷ See, for example, his extended argument on the ubiquity of Christ in his 1528 Treatise, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," LW 37:151–372; WA 26.261–509.

⁵⁸ Luther states, "Whoever would have heard the words, 'Christian holy people' could have promptly concluded that the pope is no people, much less a holy Christian people. So too the bishops, priests, and monks are not holy Christian people, for they do not believe in Christ, nor do they lead a holy life, but are rather the wicked and shameful people of the devil. He who does not truly believe in Christ is not Christian or a Christian. He who does not have the Holy Spirit against sin is not holy. Consequently, they cannot be 'a Christian holy people,' that is, *sancta et catholica ecclesia*." "On the Council and the Church," 1539. LW 41:144–145; WA 50.625.8–15.

⁵⁹ LW 41:145; WA 50.625.29–626.5.

⁶⁰ LW 41:145; WA 50.626.33.

⁶¹ LW 41:148; WA 50.628.29–30.

⁶² LW 41:150; WA 50.629.28–35.

⁶³ LW 22:55; WA 46.583.10–23.

⁶⁴ LW 41:164; WA 50.641.20–21.

⁶⁵ LW 41:164; WA 50.641.1. To possess the sacred cross was also to be united "into Christ in a death like his,"—to become a part of the body of Christ—that is even united on the cross, for the sake of the gospel.

⁶⁶ LW 41:167; WA 50.644.14.

⁶⁷ James Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press; and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 65.